The H-Files

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The H-Files

by DBMars

Summary

Agent Hannibal Lecter is ordered by his superiors and a mysterious Cigarette Smoking Man to partner with "Spooky" Graham - an FBI agent obsessed with unexplained phenomena - and use his scientific and medical knowledge to debunk his cases. But when the two head out to Oregon to investigate a series of mysterious deaths linked to lights in the sky, he gets more than he bargained for.

Will is Mulder, Hannibal is Scully, and this is the pilot episode, part 1!

Chapter 1

FBI Academy – Quantico, VA – 1993

I keep my eye on the trainee across from me. The way his cheeks have gone sallow and his breath catches suggests he may faint before my lecture concludes. I adjust the arm of the corpse in front of us, revealing more of the burned tissue over the external oblique muscles. "Electrocution affects electrolytic conduction, disrupting the heartbeat and most of the autonomic systems. Death occurs from tissue damage, necrosis, in the heart itself, particularly in the sinus and atrioventricular nodes. A cattle prod, as you can see, can kill. In a field investigation you would be looking for a reddish, parchmentlike abrasion…"

I am interrupted – rudely – by a man banging through the heavy metal doors of the morgue. He has the swagger of a field agent, purposely not batting an eye at the corpse as he approaches, reaches over it, and hands me a folded slip of paper.

"Thank you," I say, a rime of frost on my courtesy. As he leaves, I notice the young man in front of me wavering. "Miss Noah, would you kindly see to Mr. Reece?"

I alert her just in time to help the trainee away from the examination table to sit on a nearby counter, fanning him with her notebook. I silence the scattered chuckles with a look and open the note I was given.

Dr. Lecter: Your attendance is required in Washington at 1600 hrs. sharp.

According to my wristwatch, it is 1:03 pm. The note is unsigned and bears no letterhead.

I conclude my lecture but inform the front desk that I must cancel my last class of the day. It only takes 48 minutes to drive in, but there is the matter of parking. Besides, when one is unsure of the nature of a meeting, it is better to be overdressed than the opposite. I stop home in Merrifield and choose my chocolate plaid suit, pairing it with a dark orange shirt and tie with azure accents, adjusting my pocket square to complement. This also gives me a chance to freshen the marinade I'm using to soften and flavor Mr. Kolton's liver.

I arrive promptly at the FBI headquarters as directed, approaching a receptionist. "Good afternoon. Agent Hannibal Lecter. I believe I am expected."

She gives me a strange glance, noting, perhaps, my accent, or my suit, which is subdued but nothing like the drab black, navy, or brown off-the-rack ensembles she's likely used to seeing. She looks from my badge to my face several times, adjusting her glasses, and then says, "See Section Chief Blevins. Third floor, violent crime division."

I have a great deal of expertise on that subject, as both the investigator and the perpetrator.

Upstairs, I move through the busy floor of the violent crime division, which is littered with cubicles and harried agents, the walls full of cork boards covered in crime scene photos and bits of string connecting suspects and locations and victims. It is a monumental effort not to stop in front of the largest one of all, labeled CHESAPEAKE RIPPER. Ah, these low-quality crime scene photos never do my work any justice. I enjoy the dichotomy of bland cubicle workspaces with images of ultraviolence. It could be an accounting firm, were it not for the photos, though one populated nearly entirely by men. Heads pop up as I pass, taking note of my dress, or my briefcase, which cost as much as their holiday bonus pay.

Down a hallway I find a door marked SECTION CHIEF SCOTT BLEVINS. I knock politely and a voice tells me, "It's open!"

The office is cluttered, the decor minimal to nonexistent, and it reeks of cigarette smoke. My lungs notwithstanding, the smell will no doubt permeate my suit and I'll have to have it cleaned and aired. Two nearly-identical men in their '50s sit at an oval table littered with case files, while another – younger – lingers to the side, his elbow resting on a filing cabinet where he's placed an ash tray, the cigarette in question balanced between two stained fingers. I once ate a young woman who was a smoker; her lungs gave a subtle, rich, tangy flavor as a result. But she'd had the habit for a few years at best. This man's lungs would taste like the ashtray he's using.

The man I assume to be Chief Blevins stands and offers a hand, though the others decline the courtesy. "Agent Lecter. Thank you for coming on such short notice. Please." He indicates a chair across from the table. I sit, setting my briefcase down beside me and lean back, daring to cross my legs when so many other men in this building would insist on sitting with them spread, in case there was any doubt they housed the requisite anatomy. "I see you've been with us for just over two years."

"Yes, that's correct," I say with a pleasant smile for each of my careful examiners.

"You went to medical school but chose not to practice. How did you come to work for the FBI?"

"And what's with the accent?" the other man, whose bland appearance makes him so indistinguishable from the chief's that they might as well be twins.

"My accent is Lithuanian, touched, perhaps by time spent in Paris," I explain politely as I imagine gutting him and watching the blood smear all over the files spread on the desk. "I emigrated ten years ago and have since been awarded American citizenship. While attending Johns Hopkins school of medicine I was recruited by the agency. My advisers in the program saw it as an act of rebellion, but I saw the FBI as a place I could distinguish myself."

There is a weighted silence as the others shift through their files or smoke and glower. It's a ploy to make me wait, watch me squirm. I don't give them the satisfaction; I smile pleasantly and wait with the same infinite patience I use to stalk my victims.

The cigarette-smoking man stubs out his Morley, still scrutinizing me with dark, wary eyes. At last, he speaks, his voice brittle at the edges with distrust and cellular damage. "Are you familiar with an agent named Will Graham?"

At last. Satisfaction blooms in me, but I keep my expression neutral and friendly. “Yes, I am.”

“How so?” He blows smoke up toward the ceiling, a meaningless courtesy considering the haze that fills the room.

“By reputation. Began his career in New Orleans as a police officer. Then on to Florida to study entomology and criminal psychology. He wrote the standard monograph on time of death based on insect behavior. That, coupled with his psychological talents brought him to the Behavioral Science Unit where his work helped the FBI identify Monte Propps in 1988. Generally thought of as the best profiler in the unit, often collaborating with the violent crime section.” I pause, affecting a bit of bashful humor. “He had a nickname at the academy, or so I’ve been told. ‘Spooky’ Graham.”

I catch the cigarette-smoking man’s look as he continues to scrutinize me. If I didn’t know better, I would think he was planning to have me for dinner.

“What I’ll also tell you,” Chief Blevins says, leaning back to cross his arms over his barrel chest, “is Agent Graham has developed a consuming devotion to an unassigned project outside the Bureau mainstream. Are you familiar with the so-called H-files?”

Will Graham could be an H-file himself, displaying, or so I’ve heard, an uncanny ability to adopt the point of view of serial killers to profile them with such accuracy the process threatens his own sanity and identity. “I believe they have something to do with unexplained phenomena.”

“More or less,” Chief Blevins says, wavering a hand in the air. “The reason you’re here, Agent Lecter, is we want you to assist Graham on these H-files. You’ll write field reports of your activities along with your observations on the validity of the work, making your reports exclusively to this group.”

I tilt my head. “Am I to understand you want me to ‘debunk’ the H-files project, Chief Blevins?”

A tense silence follows. The smoking man lights up again, the match reflecting in his dark eyes, so brown they seem all pupils. He blows smoke from his nose like a twitchy dragon, giving me a pinched, discomforting look. I hold his gaze steadily, as if waiting for him to say something.

But he doesn’t speak. Blevins says, “Agent Lecter, we trust you’ll make the proper scientific analysis.” It is a veiled threat masked behind a simple directive, a desire for information, but the way he touches his ear and glances at the other man says everything. “You’ll want to contact Agent Graham shortly. We look forward to seeing your reports.”

This is a dismissal. I stand, nodding to the two at the table, then catch the eye of the smoking man. “Good afternoon,” I say by way of goodbye.

No time like the present. I make my way back through the violent crime section, and downstairs, revisiting the secretary. She directs me to an elevator that sinks me down to the

first sub-basement level. The doors open and I move through the cinder block hallway that smells of industrial floor cleaner and wet ceiling tiles. At the end of the hallway, past shelves of case file boxes, is an office door cracked open. The placard reads GRAHAM. I can hear shuffling within, the movement of a chair. My nose wrinkles against cheap aftershave and stale coffee.

I knock. I knock again. "Sorry, nobody down here but the FBI's most *unwanted*," comes a wry voice.

I push the door open, revealing a small, windowless room packed with filing cabinets and shelves of still more files and paperwork. Despite what must be the vast amount of material crammed into the space, it is remarkably tidy, stacks neatly organized, lines clean. The bulletin board above the desk, however, is a mess of photos and handwritten notes. My eye is immediately drawn to a large poster of a science-fiction style flying disc, emblazoned with the phrase "I WANT TO BELIEVE."

They don't look like inverted bowls. More like saucers, thin and fragile, somehow meant to support an even more fragile teacup.

Against my will, my mind shows me the images that have haunted me most of my life – my mother's teacup shattering against the floor, the white light filling every window of our hunting lodge, my sister's screams, the whining, mechanical hum of the silver beast that descended from the heavens. My mother's terrified shrieking as I raced out to save my sister, only to be rendered weightless, floating in searing blindness, and borne away.

I slam that door in the memory palace and attach another lock to it. They seem to rust and break at the most inopportune times.

Agent Will Graham is bent over a light box, examining a series of slides. He, too, seems to forego the typical FBI uniform of dark suits and white shirts with uninteresting ties. He looks more like a rumpled professor or domesticated outdoorsman in brown pants and a green collared shirt that could just as easily be worn for yard work. His hair is curly, untidy in places, and he wears a layer of scattered stubble. When he turns to me, Will Graham lowers his tortoiseshell glasses down from his head. Fascinating. Nearsighted?

I give him my best introduction smile, oozing friendliness and ease. "Agent Graham. My name is Hannibal Lecter." I approach and offer a hand. He shakes it very briefly, and a shadow flickers over his expression as I hold on just a little too long for his comfort. "I've been assigned to work with you."

He glances at my eyes for a fraction of a second before turning his head, putting the frames of his glasses between us as a barrier. "Nice to, ah, suddenly be so *highly regarded*," he says, all barbed irony. Rude. He turns in his seat and fiddles with the slides, deliberately disengaging. Ruder still. "So, who'd you piss off to get stuck with this detail, Lecter?"

He knows full well why I am here, it seems. Rather, why I've been sent. But they could have sent anyone. I was not chosen at random. There are multiple chess pieces moving at the same time on a three-dimensional board, and I have control of the queens. I am here because I seek truth. Because I cannot trust my memories – they might be nothing but a traumatized

child's nightmares, a wounded brain trying to explain what happened the night the world went away. Will Graham may very well be the lantern to light my way.

"As it happens, I've heard a lot about you," I say pleasantly as he gets up from his desk chair and opens a tidy file cabinet drawer, thumbing through the immaculate plastic tabs. I wonder if his drawers at home are kept just as meticulously. "I'm looking forward to working with you."

"Really? I was, ah, under the impression you were sent here… to spy on me." He opens the file and glances through a few typewritten pages before returning it to its proper place. I let my eyes wander over him as he stands in profile. I'd jump at the chance to spy on him. Voyeurism is one of my favorite parts of my process - to see without being seen. To stalk. I imagine him moving through his assuredly modest home, stretching, scratching his head, sleepy. Ready for bed in, oh, a pair of dull boxer shorts. I think of him illuminated by the light of his refrigerator as he searches for a little something before bed, uplit by its unholy glow as I watch him through the window.

Interesting. My body is responding sexually to the image. I wipe it away as though I'd drawn it in steam on a mirror. "Agent Graham, if you have any doubts about my credentials or qualifications-"

"-you're a medical doctor and you're teaching at the academy." He interrupts me. Rude. Instead of imagining my knife piercing his skin, I picture him on his knees, waiting to make it up to me. Again, I force the image to dissolve. "You did your undergraduate degree in physics, while, ah, concurrently double majoring in psychology and art history with a focus on Renaissance Italy." He selects another file from the cabinet and slides the drawer shut. "I dunno about your artsy stuff, but your senior thesis was 'Einstein's Twin Paradox: A New Interpretation'. Now, there's a credential: rewriting Einstein."

I successfully mask my surprise that he's so familiar with my work. "Did you happen to read it?"

He returns to his desk chair and compares something in the file to a slide. I glance over at his computer screen as he bends over to retrieve a dropped report from the file. I make out the words force, abduction, and light before he rights himself. "Yeah. I liked it," he says, still not looking at me directly, the rims of his glasses in the way. "It's just that in, ah… in my line of work – the laws of physics rarely seem to apply." He adjusts another slide, then turns on the projector, flashing a washed-out image on the blank bit of cinder block wall kept clear, it seems, for this purpose. He has a curve to his lips on one side that strikes me as impudent. I want to wipe it off his face, one way or another.

"Not fond of eye contact, are you?" I say, an attempt to derail and destabilize.

Now he swivels in his chair and looks directly at me. His eyes are like the ocean between islands in Greece. "Eyes are distracting. You see too much. You don't see enough. And it's hard to focus when you're thinking *those whites are really white,* or *they must have hepatitis, or is that a burst vein?"*

I can't help but smile, returning his gaze steadily.

“So… yeah. I try to avoid eyes whenever possible. It’s even easier in the dark.” Agent Graham steps behind me and switches off the lights. The windowless cell is lit now only by the projected image – a young woman, lifeless on the ground. Ah. I had wondered when we’d discuss murder. While Will Graham is apparently very aware of my career and accomplishments, he doesn’t know of my finest work as the Chesapeake Ripper. Perhaps, someday, he will.

Will leans his hips against his desk, crossing his arms over his midsection. It catches the loose fabric of his shirt, drawing it against the bow of his back. Distracted again. I refocus on the image he’s elected to show me. “Maybe you can give your medical opinion, though,” he says. “Oregon female. Age twenty-one. No explainable cause of death. Nothing in the autopsy.” He switches slides, showing me a close-up shot of the young woman’s lower back, marred by two livid red welts. According to the ruler nearby for scale, they are roughly the size of an American dime. “Two distinct marks, however, are found on her lower back. Can you ID these marks… Dr. Lecter?”

I move closer to the projected image. Despite not liking eye contact, I can feel him watching me. Perhaps he has some voyeuristic tendencies as well. “Needle punctures, perhaps. An animal bite. Electrocution is a possibility.”

When he switches slides again, I hide my surprise. It is not the body from another angle, but a diagram showing a chemical compound.

“How’s your chemistry? This is the substance found in the surrounding tissue.”

I study the image, my brain humming steadily. I do love a challenge, and I find them so rarely. “It’s inorganic. Perhaps a synthetic protein.”

“Hell if I know,” Agent Graham says.

“That’s surprising. You must have had your fair share of chemistry studying entomology. Your monograph on determining time of death based on insect activity required a high level of understanding to compose, I’m sure.”

“By all means, be sure,” he snarks, but the subtle pink staining his cheekbones tells me he’s pleased I’m familiar with his work as well. “I’ve never seen it, either. But here it’s found again, in Sturgis, South Dakota.” He switches slides, this one depicting a large man in a motorcycle club vest with the same two raised welts on his back. He switches again, showing me another male body with the same marks in the same place, spanning the thoracolumbar fascia and the internal oblique muscles. “And again, in Shamrock, Texas.”

A true mystery. This is delightful. I haven’t had an afternoon so pleasant since I murdered the man sent to evaluate me by my life insurance agency and stretched his corpse across two rows of bus seats. “Do you have a theory?”

“I have, ah… plenty of theories,” he dismisses, joining me in front of the projected image, the dead man’s outline juxtaposed over him, throwing the kind of light that both obscures and reveals. His forehead bears a gentle shimmer of perspiration, and I can smell more of him now, the scent beneath the cheap aftershave – dogs, fresh splits of pine, machine

oil, and something sweet I'd need more time and a closer proximity to identify. He doesn't look at me, turning his head to the side a few degrees to let the slide's light catch on the lenses of his glasses instead. "What has me stumped is why Bureau policy is to label these cases as unexplained phenomena and ignore them."

I can sense the rumble of anger beneath his sardonic tone, taut with frustration.

"So, Dr. Lecter, do you believe in the existence of… *extraterrestrials*?" He says it with a wry twist that might be a kind of bitter smile. I tilt my head. "As a scientist," he prompts, leaving me to lean against the edge of his desk again.

"Logically, I'd have to say no." I do strive to tell the truth in my own way. Logically, I shouldn't. But I am here because I need his help with the illogical – to determine, once and for all, if something happened to me, or I happened. "Given the distances needed to travel from the far reaches of space, the energy requirements would exceed–"

He interrupts, shaking his head. "Conventional wisdom. That girl in Oregon – she's the fourth member of her graduating class to die under mysterious circumstances. When convention and-and science offer no answers, might we not consider the, ah, the fantastic as a plausibility?"

He tested me at first, showing me the chemical compound and the crime scene photos. Now, he wants to make the boundaries clear. Impudent. Wants to get a rise out of me, surely, to define the methods of interaction.

My answer is mild, clinical, the kind of voice I'd use if I'd chosen to become a psychiatrist. "The girl is dead. Death occurs for a reason." Sometimes, I am that reason. "If it was natural causes, then it's plausible something was missed in the postmortem. If she was murdered, it's plausible there was a sloppy investigation. What I find fantastic is your willingness to sidestep human error and search for answers beyond the realm of science. The answers are there, I'm sure. You just have to know where to look." I raise an eyebrow to add in the sentence I won't let my mouth say. *Apparently, you don't know where to look. Or you want me to think you don't know where to look.*

Agent Graham looks at me now, a brief glance up through his side-lit lenses. His left eye is illuminated as well, making it unearthly blue and leaving the other subdued, its subtle green and brown tones shimmering through the dominant color. He smiles, the most genuine expression I've seen yet, and I'm momentarily distracted by his beauty. It's like visiting the Louvre, making one's way quickly to see a great work before a crowd forms, and catching sight of an exquisite but uncelebrated painting in a forgotten side gallery that makes one lose all sense of purpose, the internal compass spinning and spinning.

"And that's why they put the I in FBI." He breaks away and sinks back into his desk chair, rolling over to the glowing blue screen of his computer monitor. "See you bright and early then, Dr. Lecter. We leave for the, ah, the very plausible state of Oregon at 8 am."

I can't help but smile back, a beam of pleasure, as he turns away from me and begins clacking at the keys. "Until then, Will."

I’ve taken a risk, demanding a first name basis. He makes no comment, waves a hand over his shoulder.

I take my leave and hurry home to pack.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

"Ever have any problems, Will?"

"Me?" Will scoffed, ejecting his mixed tape from his Walkman. "No."

She's the girl of my dreams

She's the girl on my mind she's got plenty for the fool

'cause she's the hurting kind

I lost my heart in the east another part in the west

You better jump back baby you're the girl I love the best

I'm gonna ride the wind there's nothing I won't do

I'm coming up real fast I got my eyes on you,

Yeah see you're eyes of love well tell me what you see

I see your long black hair moving over me, yeah

Oh yes, I feel good now now

Let's talk about love, let's talk about love let's talk about love, let's talk about it

Alright, alright, alright, I got my eyes on you

Alright, alright, alright, I got my eyes on you, yeah

With my heart over here another part over there

I still got pretty love and baby I don't care

Oh, let's talk about love, let's talk about love

Let's talk about love, alright, alright, alright, I got my eyes on you…

Will flexed his toes against the fabric of his socks and stretched. He'd had a little nap listening to the quieter songs at the beginnings of his mixed tape, but Robert Plant's high energy song had brought him back into full consciousness. He sat up a little and winced – a pillow against the side of the plane and three seats to himself still wasn't very comfortable. He glanced over where his feet perched on the armrest to see Agent Lecter diligently flipping through the files Will had brought him, detailing the mysterious events surrounding what Will referred to in his mind as the Dot Deaths.

The stewardess rolled by with her cart, giving Will a smile that served as a thin veil for her disdain. Will sat up, pulling his headphones down around his neck. "Bacon or sausage egg muffin?" she asked, indicating two piles of sad-looking pre-wrapped sandwiches.

"Uh, bacon. And a coffee, please – black, two sugar packets."

"Excuse me," came the smooth, cultured voice of his companion. "I've something packed for us, thank you… Angela."

Grumpy flight attendant Angela smiled genuinely this time. "Oh, isn't that nice. Need any silverware?"

"No, thank you."

"Alrighty then." She pushed the cart past them, up to the next little cluster of passengers on the sparsely populated early-morning flight.

"You did what, now?" Will asked, sliding into the seat closest to the aisle, Dr. Lecter right across. "I'm starving. I, uh, I needed that shitty bagel sandwich."

"I'm very careful about what I put into my body. Which means I end up preparing most meals myself." Dr. Lecter lifted an insulated bag from beneath the seat, and unzipped it, coming up with two Tupperware containers and a stainless steel thermos. Also from within the bag came two coffee cups made of what looked like antique sterling silver. "Sugar, you said?"

"Uh, yeah."

Now a little metal dish with a hinged lid, bearing sugar cubes and a tiny set of matching tongs. Dr. Lecter poured coffee into one of the cups, added the sugar, and stirred with a little spoon, then set the cup on an honest-to-God saucer before passing it over to Will.

Will accepted it with a sense of delighted wonder, setting it on his tray table, then putting the glass dish he was given next to it. It was some kind of breakfast mix. Savory steam wafted up to his nose and he inhaled gratefully. "You made this?"

"A little protein scramble to the day. Some eggs, some sausage."

Will let out a disbelieving little laugh, accepting the silver fork offered and taking a bite. "It's… delicious, thank you."

“My pleasure,” Dr. Lecter said, taking a bite of his own portion. Will knew, objectively, that responding to being thanked with *my pleasure* was typical when learning British English, versus *you’re welcome*. But his reptile brain lingered over the way Dr. Lecter said pleasure. The empathy pulse unfurled. Yes, it had been pleasurable, making this dish and bringing it to Will, watching him eat and enjoy.

Not just pleasurable. Sensuous.

Lecter spoke again, and the pulse coiled back up, allowing Will to stamp out that little flame.

“I would apologize for my ambush yesterday, but I know I’ll soon be apologizing again, and you’ll tire of that eventually, so I have to consider using apologies sparingly.”

Will chuckled, chewing the spiced meat with an appreciative, “Mmm. Though I’ll say that showing up with breakfast to save me from airline food isn’t gonna make me stop calling you a spy.”

“Or, we could socialize like adults. God forbid, we become friendly.”

Will scoffed, chasing the last pieces of egg and sausage onto his fork and into his mouth. He chewed and swallowed before saying, “I don’t find you that interesting.”

Dr. Lecter reached out with the coffee thermos, offering Will a refill. “You will,” he promised.

Will accepted the coffee. If he was being honest, it was some of the best coffee he’d ever had outside of New Orleans.

Hannibal repacked the food containers, leaving them with the ridiculous silver coffee cups and saucers. A woman and her child passed in the aisle, headed for the bathrooms in the back of the plane. “Mama, look!” the little girl squealed, the braids on her head bouncing as she skipped closer, clacking their beaded ends together. “They’re having a tea party!”

“Oh, isn’t that… nice,” the mother said, shuffling her child further down the aisle, throwing a glance over her shoulder.

Will tipped his head back on the scratchy airline seat and laughed as Dr. Lecter lifted his cup from the saucer and sipped with aristocratic delicacy. “Tiffany’s,” Lecter said. “1902. The monogrammed L was for the family of Karl Landsteiner.”

“You… bought the cups that belonged to the man who discovered… blood typing?” Will looked at the polished silver cup engraved with a flower motif and an etched calligraphy L. “Big fan, huh?”

“And the monogram was the correct letter. I would have brought china, of course, but it doesn’t travel as well.”

Will had to stop himself. He was dangerously close to being charmed. What was this guy doing in the FBI, home of dogged, masculine G-men and so-called “alpha males” who had come up from military or police work?

He was saved by Lecter's next comment. "I'm curious why you left criminal profiling. Your former colleagues say you have a knack with the monsters."

Will's mouth curled sourly. He was more than fine with people calling him Spooky Graham and mocking his work with the H files. He had the curse of pure empathy; he knew what people thought of him. But he resented this question every time he got it, for reasons that he couldn't pin down except that he didn't want to be reminded of his time in the BSU. It brought back thoughts he couldn't control — couldn't get the forts up fast enough.

"That's a superstition," he said, getting up from his seat and depositing his cup back on Lecter's tray table with a rude little clatter, not making eye contact. He flopped back down on his row of seats and put his feet, hoping to truncate the conversation.

"Ever have any problems, Will?"

"Me?" Will scoffed, ejecting his mixed tape from his Walkman. "No."

"Of course, you don't. You and I are just alike. Problem free. Nothing for us to feel horrible about." Lecter finished his coffee and packed up the antique silver cups and saucers. He paused before putting away the last one, holding up to examine it. "Your former colleagues thought of you as a fragile little teacup, the finest china used only for special guests."

"Used sparingly, in case I break?" Will popped in the Talking Heads' *Speaking in Tongues*. "That's not why I transferred out of there, if you're wondering."

"But it was part of the reason." Lecter was sitting as gentlemanly as possible in his airline chair, legs crossed, though his knee hit the seat in front of him, thankfully empty.

Will shook his head, slipping on his headphones. "My thoughts are not often tasty," he admitted. "But I've seen some shit in the H files, too. It's not, ah… that I couldn't handle the BSU." His finger caressed the play button, but he didn't press it. "How do you see me?" he asked, eyes averted, looking at the teeth of the cassette tape through the little plastic window of the Walkman's case. Gripping to make sound.

"The mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by." Lecter gave him that same mild, maddening smile, and opened the case files again.

Will reclined, headphones on but no music playing. He watched Lecter rifle through autopsy reports and newspaper clippings. Will knew the file front to back, knew the grainy yearbook photos that appeared in small-town newspaper stories with headlines like "FORMER HONOR STUDENT'S BODY FOUND IN STATE PARK" and "4TH TRAGIC FATALITY BEFALLS CLASS OF '89." Will stretched his arm behind his head and settled in, but still didn't close his eyes. Instead, he studied Lecter's profile as he read, the angle of his chin and mouth. When they'd first met, Will's furtive glances had shown him a guy who sort of resembled a handsome fish, if he was being honest. But further, uninterrupted study…

Lecter glanced up when the fasten seatbelts sign came on, and Will's stomach flipped when a stray hair skimmed across his forehead, escaping its perfect coif. The PA dinged, and the

captain's voice flooded the plane as the mother and daughter hustled back to their seats. "I'd like to ask all passengers to fasten their seatbelts as we make our descent into–"

The pilot was cut off mid-sentence by a sudden violent bout of turbulence. Overhead storage bins that must have been shoddily secured popped open, tossing luggage in the aisle. Luckily, the plane wasn't full, and there wasn't much in the way of an avalanche.

Then, all the cabin lights blinked into darkness, leaving them only with the cloudy light coming through the windows. After a moment of silence, a skipped heartbeat, the little girl a few rows up began to cry. Will's heart clenched. *I can't hear the engines.*

With a whine that became a roar, the plane fired up again, recovering from the momentary blip. It was all over in a matter of seconds, but a total power failure was nothing to sneeze at.

Will sat up, looking up and down the aisles. Even the stewardess strapped into her chair in the back was breathing hard, her eyes wide and flinty with fear.

And here was Lecter, his demeanor practically unchanged, gathering up a few loose papers that had spilled from his file and slipping them back into his briefcase. He took out a yellow legal pad and tore off a page, folding it up in a practiced, meticulous way.

Will scoffed out a laugh. "This must be the place, huh?"

"Indeed." Lecter's deft hands created an origami rose out of the yellow lined paper. He fixed it to a coffee stirring stick that had fallen nearby and got out of his seat. Will watched him give the paper flower to the crying little girl, who smiled and dried her tears.

After landing, they found the rental car booth, claimed their nondescript sedan, and headed for the small community of Bellefleur, the town beset by the strange Class of '89 tragedies or Dot Deaths. Will had gotten behind the wheel, shooting Lecter a glance that had dared him to object. Lecter hadn't seemed to mind, and now sat primly in the passenger's seat, still reading the files, making notes on the yellow legal pad he'd used to make the child's flower.

Will tried not to think about how much he liked Lecter's cologne – it was sweet and smoky, masculine yet floral. He fiddled around with the radio, trying to find something that wasn't New Kids on the Block or Whitney Huston. He settled on some Creedence, then dug around in his green jacket's pocket for his bag of Hampton Farms Cajun Hot Nuts, depositing the spent shells in the cup holder. Glancing at Lecter, he delighted in the raised eyebrow that resulted. "Hot nuts?" he said with a wry half-smile, offering the package. "Oh, wait, you're careful 'bout what you, ah, put in your body."

Lecter's response was, "You didn't mention yesterday that this case has already been investigated."

"The FBI looked into the first three deaths after the local guys failed to turn up any evidence. Our guys came out and spent a week." He popped another peanut in his mouth, reveling in the spice on his tongue. "But, ah… without any explanation, they were called in and the case was reclassified. Buried in the H-files until I dug it up last week." Will dropped more shells in the cupholder. Creedence gave way to static, and Will's mind lit up. Maybe…? He scrolled

through the dial, starting at the bottom, and slowly going towards the highest numbers, then switched to AM and tried the same.

“You saw something they didn’t?”

Will shrugged, switching back to FM and starting over.

“The autopsy reports on the first three victims showed no unidentified marks or tissue samples. But those reports were signed by a different medical examiner than the latest victim.”

Will smiled in a way that felt pleasant on his face, like a balm. “Pretty good, Lecter.”

“Better than you expected? Or better than you hoped?”

Will was getting tired of that mild, clinical tone. The empathy told him what it was – a mask. What it was obscuring, though, he didn’t know. Hopefully the spy was rattled or defensive. “I’ll ah, I’ll let you know when we get past the easy stuff.”

“Is the medical examiner a suspect?”

Will listened for a moment to a far-off broadcast. Somebody shouting about the devil tempting the weak into sin. “Won’t know until we do a little gravedigging.”

“You’re having the victims exhumed?” There, a little surprise in that even tone, finally.

“Yeah, we gotta see if we can get a tissue sample that matches the girl’s. You’re, ah, you’re not squeamish about that sort of thing, are you?”

“You’ll find I’m squeamish about very little,” Lecter promised. He put his hand on the back of Will’s headrest. It was just for a moment, to adjust his angle in the car’s seat, but it made Will’s heart go through an ignition sequence he couldn’t control. Damn, he better not be fucking blushing. Would’ve been so much easier if Blevins had sent some shrew-like woman full of disapproval or buzz cut guy whose idea of small talk was sports statistics. “Two or three years underground, and we all look the same. Sort of that lean and hungry look.”

While Will was considering his words, the radio went haywire. Will felt the prickle along his nerves, a kind of static electricity playing with the hairs on the back of his neck and his heartrate again. The radio switched stations rapidly of its own volition before dissolving into a low, loud hum that resonated through Will’s chest.

He’d felt it before.

Will pulled over and braked hard enough to rock them both forward in their seats. Will threw the car into park, popped the trunk, and leapt out. He ripped open his bag and grabbed the can of orange spray paint he’d packed. Will jogged back down the road about five yards, coming to a stop where the unsound had come through the car’s speakers. He scanned the trees, the road, the sky.

Lecter joined him, smoothing down his hair against the woodland breeze. “What is it?”

Will bent and spray painted a large orange X on the asphalt, going over it twice to make sure it was solidly visible.

“Oh,” he said, righting himself and popping the lid back on the can. “It’s, ah… probably nothing.”

Chapter 3

I haven't felt like this in years.

Will Graham has ignited something in me, an intrigue that spans every inch of my spectrum of interest – intellectual, metaphysical, emotional, social, sexual. I know it's impossible, but it feels as though this was fated, that arranging to work with him was akin to snatching my own destiny. Somehow, he is going to help me find them. Help me understand myself. And come to terms with what happened to Mischa.

Unless she's still alive.

Our rented car passes a sign that welcomes us to Bellefleur, claiming that the small town is a "gateway to fun and recreation." It is a rustic hamlet that has leaned heavily into said aesthetic, full of shops selling hiking gear, fishing tackle, bait, souvenir tee shirts and ball caps, ice cream, fried food. Families walk the promenade with strollers and children throwing tantrums, or riding by on bicycles.

There are several hotels and rental cabins in town, according to the signs, and since this is the second week in June, they are all full. Our accommodations are in a run-down motel that must have, at one time, been on the main road. Now the highway curves in a different direction, and the Bellefleur Motel has only three other cars in the lot. Will pulls in and visits the office, returning with two room keys on diamond-shaped plastic fobs. He moves the car down to the end of the lot and parks again.

He stretches, showing me how long and lean his body can appear. I note the way his quadriceps flex against the fabric of his trousers. He relaxes and breathes in the peaty, forested air. "Almost feels like a vacation, huh Lecter?"

"Not my idea of one, no."

"Fresh air? Forest? Fishing? Yeah, this is, ah, paradise." He opens the trunk to get his bag, and hands me mine, though he doesn't meet my gaze. I've come to crave his eye contact. "Should've brought my dogs."

"They could have helped us dig up the grave." It's a risk, this kind of gallows humor, but he laughs, opening his mouth enough to show teeth, and the sound blazes across my skin, prickling across it like a shift in atmosphere. "And who cares for them in your absence?" He doesn't wear a wedding ring, but that doesn't mean anything.

"Oh, there's a family that lives down the road from me in Wolf Trap. Five kids, oldest one just graduated from high school. They dog-sit for me." He scoffs a good-natured laugh. "You'd think I'm, ah, saving money by not using a service, but those kids know how to hustle."

No live-in partner.

“Five kids helping, times a dollar a day, times seven dogs,” he calculates. “Highway robbery.”

“Seven?”

He looks at me then, as he shifts his bag to the other shoulder. I can tell he’s trying to read me. Gauge my reaction to that many pets. Seeing if I’m going to judge him, call him strange, treat him as any other typical FBI agent would.

Instead, I say, “You collect strays.”

He brightens visibly, though he angles his glasses to avoid eye contact again. “Can’t resist.”

“Admirable. The desire to shelter.”

That’s too much for him. He turns and struggles the key into the lock of his motel room and disappears inside.

An inspection of my own room reveals water damage on the carpet and cigarette burns on the comforter, but a recent fumigation that I can still faintly smell must have cleared it of bed bugs. I’m hanging up my suit for tomorrow when he raps on my door. “Daylight’s burning, Lecter.”

We drive directly to the local cemetery where a backhoe sits, ready to dig into a grassy knoll amid green lawn and gravestones. I scan the area for anyone that seems like a family member, here to impede the investigation by protesting the exhumation order. Thankfully, there is no one fitting that description. Will and I join the milling group of city workmen and uniformed police officers, heading for the cluster of men in slightly more professional dress.

A middle-aged man in a blue shirt and a windbreaker approaches, excited concern painted on his bland features. “Agent Graham?” he extends a hand. “John Truitt, County Coroner’s office.”

“Yeah.” Will ignores it, angling his glasses again to avoid looking directly at the man’s face. He glances at me and does a double take in response to my bespoke ivory shirt and tan linen jacket. I attempted to be casual and forgo a tie, but I’m still the best-dressed person in the cemetery, not accounting for the dead, of course. “This is Agent Hannibal Lecter. How soon can we get started?”

“We’re ready to go,” Truitt says.

“Then go,” Will prompts brusquely.

Truitt nods and whistles to the work crew. The backhoe growls to life and pierces the turf.

Will has to raise his voice to be heard. “Were you able to arrange for an examination facility for Dr. Lecter to use?”

As Will and Truitt discuss the arrangements, slowly climbing a knoll, dodging gravestones for a better view of the exhumation, I watch a tan sedan curve into the cemetery and pull up

abruptly on the access road. A thin man in his mid ‘40s gets out, his face a mask of fury and disgust. Ah, the relatives have arrived after all. A young woman gets out on the passenger’s side and hurries after him. He turns and orders her back in the car. She argues, but I can’t hear them over the digging equipment. After some arguing, she gets back in and slams the car door. The thin man then turns to us, marching in our direction.

“Excuse me!” he shouts, raising an indignant hand, jaw clenched. Will turns. Takes a step forward instead of adopting a defensive posture. I’m not entirely sure the man doesn’t mean to attack, but Will seems to have read him correctly, using his uncanny gifts, perhaps, as a profiler. “Who do you people think you are?! You come out here and just do whatever you damn well please, don’t you?”

“And you are…?” Will lets the question hang.

“Dr. Jay Nemman. The County Medical Examiner.”

Not a relative. The girl in the car is the right age to have been a classmate of the deceased – perhaps they were friends.

“Agent Graham, FBI. This is my partner, Dr. Hannibal Lecter.”

Partner. I’m not much for American poets, but I can see how hope is a feathered thing that perches on the soul. Feel it, a delicate bird, its tiny feet resting on my heart.

“With all due respect,” Will continues, though he says respect with a contempt that curls his pretty mouth, “we’re investigating a possible homicide here, sir. We don’t mean to step on any… toes.”

“We’ve grieved for these kids. Their families and friends. My daughter… she’s beside herself right now!” Nemman spits.

“You must have been informed of our intentions–” Will begins.

“I’ve been away with my family,” Nemman says.

“Oh, well, that answers a question we had: why you hadn’t done the recent autopsy on Karen Swenson. You’re, ah… aware of the tissue sample taken from the girl’s body?”

A little eye contact goes a long way and Nemman is taken by surprise. His face screws up in further rancor as a result. “What’s the insinuation? You think I missed something in those other kids’ exams?”

I see a smile twitch at the corner of Will’s mouth. I read it like Shakespeare. Methinks the lady doth protest too much. Or the ME, in this case. But we won’t find out anything else if this turns into a shouting match. I attempt to placate. “No one’s insinuating anything.”

Will turns back towards the opening grave, but Dr. Nemman’s buttons, it seems, have been pushed. He hurries after. “Hey! I’m talking to you! You come here making accusations – you better be able to back them up!”

He reaches out to grab Will by the shoulder.

Don't touch him.

Before I can stop myself, my body reacts, my hand snaking out and grasping Dr. Nemman's wrist before he can make contact with Will's plaid-shirted back. Will turns and sees this, visibly startled, whether by the angry man's action or my reaction, I can't be sure.

"Daddy, please! Let's just go home!" the ME's daughter has exited the car and is standing next to the open passenger door. She has tousled hair and dark, hooded eyes, wan and bloodless. Her father, it seems, was not exaggerating her distress. "Let's go home," she repeats. "Please!"

A long beat passes. I release Nemman's wrist. He surveys the scene – everyone not actively running construction equipment staring at him. He turns, and stalks off toward his waiting daughter, whose face breaks into unadorned relief.

Will stuffs his hands in his trouser pockets and gives me a little shrug. "Guy needed a longer vacation," he snarks.

I watch the car pull away, and note a truck parked on an adjacent road. I can't see through the windshield because of the glare, but it is parked at the safe, anonymous distance required to watch everything unfold.

The men continue the work, driving their tools into the earth. Will pulls out another bag of spiced peanuts. He offers them to me again, and I again decline, though the savory spice does smell half-palatable. I retrieve my briefcase from the car and open it on a waist-high sarcophagus-style grave to review the files, even though I've memorized every word. "Ray Soames was the third victim. After graduating high school, he spent time in a state mental hospital. Treated for post-adolescent schizophrenia."

Will is collecting the shells of his peanuts in a paper napkin instead of leaving them on the ground. His display of respect for the dead as opposed to the living makes not touching him even more difficult. "Soames actually confessed to the first two murders. He, ah, begged to be locked up, but he couldn't produce any evidence he'd actually done it, or any crime. You read the cause of death?"

Of course I have. "Exposure. His body was found in the woods after escaping the hospital."

Will nods, sidling closer to look at the file over my shoulder. Most of his aftershave has melted away since we flew out this morning, and the breeze brings me Cajun spices and his natural essence, which seem to pair together like red wine with dark meat. I hunger. "Missing for only seven hours. In July. How does a twenty-year-old kid die from exposure on a warm summer night in Oregon?"

His eyes meet mine for a precious moment before a scraping sound catches his attention. The teeth of the backhoe's bucket seem to have found the casket. The machine silences itself at last, and the operator dismounts, motioning to the coroner.

We watch as the city workers dig the rest by hand, then use a winch to hoist the coffin out of the grave. Should a similar procedure be attempted on Mischa Lecter's grave, it would find nothing but soil and worms and roots. There was nothing to bury. She simply disappeared. As for my parents, my mother suffered a brain aneurysm the night my sister disappeare. My father drank himself to death a year later, aspirating on his own vomit. I found him that way.

I'm grateful to be startled from my memories as a strap on the hoist breaks with a meaty snap. A string of profanity erupts from the city workers as the coffin slips free and slams to the ground with enough momentum to set it rolling down the cemetery hill, bouncing wildly, tearing up turf. With an ear-splitting crack, it crashes against the back of a large granite headstone where it comes to rest.

"You gotta be fucking kidding me." Will shoves his bag of peanuts and the shells into his pockets and runs for the casket, which has split open upon impact. I snap my briefcase shut and follow with it tucked under my arm.

Will gets there first, the uniformed police and the coroner slowed by their awe, faces stained with shock. As the rest of us approach, he yanks the casket handle to tip it, so the bottom is on the ground. Then he curls his fingers around the upper lid.

"Hey!" the corner protests, coming to a stop at his side, cheeks florid. "This isn't official procedure!"

"Yeah, no shit," Will sasses up at him. I bend to help him raise the lid.

The body within does not appear to be the remains of a 20-year-old man. It is a shriveled, child-sized humanoid figure, with mottled, leathery skin and an oblong head.

It might not be human at all.

Is this what I've been looking for all these years? My mind is a frothing ocean, crashing against a jagged shore.

The coroner and the officers and city workers turn away in revulsion, holding their noses. One of the uniforms vomits.

"Safe to say Ray Soames didn't make the varsity basketball team," Will quips as the coroner rejoins us. "Seal it back up. Nobody sees or touches this. Nobody."

Chapter 4

Will tried as hard as he could to reign in his racing thoughts, his desire to celebrate. He couldn't take his eyes off the corpse on the examination table. This was it. This had to be it. One of *them*. The creatures that had changed the trajectory of his life, sent it on a downward spiral before he hit rock bottom and ricocheted back up, though it was slow going, a bullet through water.

Will picked up his polaroid camera and fired off a series of shots as Lecter took measurements of the creature's dimensions, reading them off with clinical efficacy into the microphone suspended above the table, his tone measured and resonant as if trying to calm Will by proxy.

Will took a breath and steadied his hand to take another polaroid. "This… is amazing. Lecter, d'you know what-what this could *be*? It's… too much to, ah, to comprehend…"

He glanced at his partner – when had he started thinking of him that way, exactly, instead of as a spy? Well, this spy certainly had something to report back that was going to have the opposite effect than Blevins intended – that the H-files were real and deserving of investigation, not under-rug-sweeping. They were in it together, now. Lecter had taken off his tailored tan blazer and rolled up his sleeves, protecting the rest of his clothing with a rubber apron, hands gloved. Will realized he'd just taken a photo not of the corpse, but of Lecter's bared forearms as they flexed along the mysterious tissues. He mentally pinched himself as Lecter continued with decorous professionalism. The only indication that he had any kind of reaction, visceral or otherwise, to the strange corpse, was a twitching muscle in his jaw.

"Subject is 136 centimeters in length, weighing 26.3 kilograms. Corpse is in advanced stages of decay and desiccation. Distinguishing features include large ocular cavities, oblate cranium. Bone structure indicates a species other than human."

Will let those words roll over him like a tide, washing away decades of self-doubt.

"Agent Graham."

"Hmm?" Will looked up from the creature on the table.

"If you would please refrain from pointing the flash of your camera at me."

Will set down the polaroid on a nearby stainless-steel table next to his developing photos. "So, Dr. Lecter. If it's not human, what is it?"

"It's mammalian. My guess is it's a chimpanzee or something from the ape family. Possibly an orangutan."

Will scoffed, running a hand over his forehead, the skin damp with fevered perspiration. "C'mon, Lecter – buried in a city cemetery? In Ray Soames' grave? Try telling that to the good townsfolk. Or the Soames family, for that matter."

“I haven’t examined the interior of the specimen yet. At this point I would make no firm conclusions, which would precede any discussion with the Soames family.”

“I want tissue samples and x-rays,” Will said, gathering up the polaroids. “I’d like blood typing, toxicology, and, ah… a full genetic workup.”

“This facility has limited capacity, Agent Graham,” Lecter said mildly, measuring the creature’s pelvis.

“What we can’t do here, we’ll order to go.” Speaking of ordering to go, despite the scent of rot that permeated the room, Will was fucking *starving*.

“Without any verifiable evidence, you believe this is some kind of extraterrestrial,” Lecter said, a statement, not a question, in that same maddeningly calm voice that reminded Will of several therapists he’d cycled through in his lifetime. Therapy didn’t work on him, but it taught him how to scam the FBI entrance screeners.

“We can, ah, we can do those x-rays here, though, can’t we? Is there any reason we can’t do them now?”

“Your focus has shifted.” Lecter measured the circumference of the corpse’s head, lifting it gently from the table with his gloved hand. His perfectly coiffed hair had loosened in the breeze at the cemetery and hung in a fringe now across his forehead.

“Shifted?”

“Whoever killed that girl, and perhaps Ray Soames, wherever he’s buried, is still out there. Tell me, Will, what does your profiler’s sense tell you about our killer? I imagine it says he’ll kill again.”

Will opened his mouth to respond, then shut it, heat prickling his neck. *He called me Will. Just like that*. His heart rebelled against the pleasure it wanted to feel, and he curled his lip in disdain to act as his shield. “You’re right. It’s, what, almost 11 pm? Let’s strap on our *six-guns* and go out stalking s-someone the FBI, or, ah, or anybody else hasn't caught in three years. Or we can take a few hours to conduct a proper scientific medical exam that might help us determine who or what this thing really is.”

Lecter hummed, lifting the creature’s hand gingerly and examining the nails, or where nails should have been.

“Look,” Will said, taking off his glasses and setting them aside to rub his face. “I’m not crazy, Lecter. I have the same doubts you have.”

Dr. Lecter glanced at the clock. “Have you finished with your pictures for the time being?”

“Yeah.”

“Would you be so kind as to bring me a cup of coffee to assist with this midnight-oil-burning?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Will said. “How do you take it?”

“Black. Thank you.”

Chapter 5

The creature in the grave doesn't match my memories.

If they are memories. Many have suggested that they are nightmares conjured by my brain, a tender organ bruised and broken by trauma.

I study the x-rays, resting them on the lampshade next to the bed, staring at them, unblinking, as if the truth will reveal itself.

I was only eleven years old then. The creatures that stole my sister and I must have seemed larger from a child's perspective. And this one is so desiccated, it's difficult to be sure.

To be sure, to grasp at knowing, I must open the door in the memory palace where I know it isn't safe to go. Across the skeleton floor of the Norman Chapel, down to the crypt, and deep within one of the bone-strewn tunnels there is a shining metallic wall that seems to have been cut into the living stone of the catacombs. But it is a door, and if I touch it, feel its unearthly texture, it will slide open, revealing the lab where I was kept, where Mischa was kept, where we were tortured and experimented on. When one of us was on the table, the other was caged nearby, so that our captors might gauge our emotional responses to seeing one another suffer.

I haven't slept in 38 hours, but my body cannot rest when my mind is in this state. I force myself to take a shower and see if it will assist with relaxation, but it doesn't. I can hear the shower running in the room next door, the cheap walls no match even for the sound of water rushing over porcelain. Will.

Thinking of him is far from a relaxing frame of mind.

I do not dress, still hoping that the urge to sleep will pay me a visit. I put on my undergarment and slip into my robe. On the small, warped table is my journal and a small cassette player, along with my fountain pen, its gold edges glimmering in the hints of dawn that make their way through cracks in the plastic blinds.

I settle in, pick up my pen, and press the play button on the cassette player, listening to my own voice fill the early-morning quiet. No sounds next door. Will must have fallen asleep. I transcribe my autopsy notes diligently; listening and recording by hand cements the details in my mind as well as forces a kind of concentration that doesn't invite nightmarish imaginings.

"... x-ray analysis confirms homologous but possibly mutated mammalian physiology. However, this does not account for a small, unidentified object found in the subject's nasal cavity – a gray metallic implant, four millimeters in length…"

I glance at the x-ray on the lampshade, noting again the slender object inserted into the skull of the remains we found in Ray Soames' coffin. I lean over and pick up the implant

itself, secured within a glass vial.

A knock at the door. I replace the vial and rise to answer, calling, “Yes?”

“Lecter.”

It’s Will. I open the door with an instant enthusiasm. He’s dressed even more casually now, if that was possible, wearing a pale blue tee shirt and a pair of jeans with a white paint stain on the thigh. No glasses. He has two Styrofoam food boxes balanced in one hand, and a cardboard cup holder with two drinks in it in the other.

“Couldn’t sleep?”

“Way too wired,” he says. “You too, from the looks of it.”

“I am having difficulty winding down, yes.”

“My turn to bring breakfast. If… you don’t mind.”

I step back from the doorway and clear the small table. Will sets down the take-out containers and I open the curtains to let in more golden light. It illuminates the side of his face, making one iris glow sapphire. He must have forgotten his ship-on-the-bottle at home; he smells only of the harsh soap provided by this establishment. “Found a diner that was open. I know, ah… you’re careful about what you put in your body. I did my best.” He sets a foam container in front of me, along with a paper cup that seems to contain black coffee.

Inside of the container is an egg white omelet with spinach and tomatoes and a cup of fruit, half its contents composed of dubious honeydew melon. “It’s been quite some time since I’ve had a vegetarian meal,” I say. It smells awful, but I plan to eat every bite of it, so he understands how much the gesture was appreciated.

Will’s container is heaped with pancakes, eggs, and bacon. He opens packets of butter and syrup and meticulously dresses the stack, then stirs in his two sugars to his own cup of coffee. “I ordered you a fresh squeezed orange juice, but the juicer machine thing was, ah… on the fritz, I guess.”

“This is more than enough, Will, thank you.” There, I’ve gone and called him his first name again. This time it was on purpose; I want to see his reaction.

He leans back in his chair, chewing behind a smile. Swallow, sip of coffee. I watch his throat work, trying to avoid being hypnotized by the movements of his laryngeal prominence. “Figure out what that little thing in Ray Soames’ nose is yet?”

“You believe the remains belong to Ray Soames?”

Will scoffs, cutting into his pancakes with the plastic silverware provided. Doesn’t answer. Instead, he asks, “Call in yet to snitch on me?”

“I haven’t called Chief Blevins, no.”

“Well, when you do, tell him I said hello.”

I tilt my head, watching him chew bacon. “You fully believe the body we found isn’t human.”

“When it looks like a duck and it quacks like a duck.” Sip of coffee. He raises the paper napkin to his lips.

“Thus, you haven’t bothered to develop a profile of our killer using the talents you possess.”

“There’s nothing to profile.”

“There’s victimology. The markings left on the bodies. Surely it’s more likely to be a human assailant.”

“We just dug up what could be an extraterrestrial that somebody stashed in a grave, and you wanna talk about what’s likely based on-on *statistics*? Psychology?” He stabs into his eggs, takes a bite, and then abandons them. “Tasteless,” he mutters.

“Do you have trouble with taste?”

“My thoughts are not often… tasty,” he says, closing the Styrofoam container and picking up his coffee.

“Nor mine,” I say, thinking of the spaceship’s door in the memory palace, the screams that waft from within. “No effective barriers.”

“I make forts.” He opens his coffee and adds another sugar packet.

“Associations come quickly.”

“So do forts.”

I dutifully chew through the indeed horrific honeydew melon and finish as much as I can before closing the lid of my own container. I catch him watching me, the corner of his mouth twitching. When I try to make eye contact, he denies me, getting up to study the x-rays I’ve left on the lampshade.

I clear the table. “I imagine what you see and learn touches everything else in your mind. Your values and decency are present yet shocked at your associations. Appalled at your dreams.”

Now he is looking at me directly, his brow furrowed, arms crossed over his chest.

“No forts in the bone arena of your skull for the things you love,” I say, stepping closer, as close as I dare.

Will’s eyes glitter and a frustrated blush glows on his cheeks. Beautiful. “Maybe you oughta try your hand at profiling,” he says. “Just not on me, okay? Consider it a professional

courtesy."

"I'm sorry, Will," I soothe. "Observing is what we do as investigators. I can't shut mine off any more than you can shut yours off."

"Listen," he says firmly. "Don't psychoanalyze me. You won't like me when I'm psychoanalyzed."

I let a measure of silence go by, allowing him to listen to the echo of his words.

"I, ah… made an appointment with Ray Soames's doctor over at the psychiatric hospital. He can't see us 'till one thirty, so, ah… maybe we try to get some sleep."

I nod.

"All right, then." Will opens the motel room door.

"Will."

He stops. Turns. The morning light should be life-affirming, but it only draws out the shadows under his eyes.

"Thank you for breakfast."

A smile ghosts on his lips, and he leaves.

Chapter 6

“Have you spent time in a facility like this?”

Will slowly swiveled his head towards the passenger seat as he eased into the parking space outside the Oregon State Psychiatric Hospital, irritation bleeding into his voice. “*No*,” he said, making sure to make the uncomfortable amount of eye contact required to drive his point home. “I haven’t. W-what are you implying, exactly, uh, Dr. Lecter?”

“You said I wouldn’t like you psychoanalyzed. I was curious how you came to that conclusion.”

Will got out of the car, slamming the door a little harder than he needed to. Lecter got out as well, then came around the side of the car to lock his briefcase in the trunk. “Is that what Blevins wants to know? If I need to be committed?”

“I assume that would be convenient for him.”

Will paused, looking back at him as he slipped on his suit jacket – brown, with subtle plaid, worn over a cornflower blue shirt and rich gold damask tie, an ensemble Will wanted to find ridiculous but couldn’t, not with the elegant way he wore it – and stepped closer to speak in a hurried hush. “He didn’t tell you why he wanted you to work with me? Just, ah… ordered you to report and debunk?”

The front double doors to the institution opened and a balding man appeared, coming down the path to greet them. “Agents?” he called.

“Blevens wants to stop you,” Lecter said under his breath as the man – presumably Dr. Glass – approached.

“Because I’m a pest. A drain on resources.”

“Because you’re asking questions he’d rather not have you ask,” came Lecter’s reply. Will’s throat bubbled up with questions of his own, but he silenced them as Lecter held out a hand for the doctor to shake. “Dr. Glass. Dr. Hannibal Lecter, and this is Agent Graham.”

“Ah, yes, Dr. Lecter – the brilliant physician who left Johns Hopkins to join the FBI of all things. Some of my friends there know you – they said you were even more promising as a psychiatrist.”

“The world’s full of them, unfortunately. I wanted my career to take a unique trajectory.”

“And so it has.” Dr. Glass guided them up the wide lawn towards the austere building. “You called about Ray Soames. He was a patient of mine, yes. I oversaw his treatment for just over a year. Clinical schizophrenia. Ray had an inability to grasp reality. He seemed to suffer from some kind of post-traumatic stress.”

Will's body gave an all-over twitch he managed to hide behind a well-timed cough. From Glass, anyway. He could see Lecter looking at him from the corner of his eye.

Lecter seemed to sense his question. "What was the antecedent?"

Glass shrugged. "Nothing. No combat fatigue or violent incident, accident, anything."

"This, ah, this mystery PTSD – is it something you've treated before?" Will asked.

"I've treated similar cases."

"Were any of these Ray Soames' classmates?" Lecter asked, getting delicately to the point. Will had to admit, Lecter had a way with people that made interviewing go a hell of a lot easier than it usually did when Will was working solo.

The question was perfectly worded and perfectly timed in a way Will couldn't explain. Dr. Glass's micro-expressions flickered across his face. He was reluctant to make the connection. Or, he'd made it, but didn't want to speak it aloud, lest it conjure more inquiry.

"Yes," Dr. Glass said, a cautious tilt to his mouth.

"Karen Swenson," Lecter said. "Did you treat her?"

"Yes, for several years," Glass admitted. Will could see sweat gathering on the hairless places on his shining forehead.

"Do you believe she was murdered?" Will could have cheered. Another perfect question, delivered in the perfect cadence – soothing, clinical, and yet pointed like a spear. Or a scalpel.

It flustered the doctor just right. "I don't know. I'm not in the business of law enforcement."

"We're trying to find a connection between these deaths," Will pressed, deliberately walking slower to keep them from entering the building just yet and being interrupted by receptionists or orderlies. "Did you, ah… did you ever treat any of these kids with hypnosis?"

Dr. Glass scoffed. "No."

Damn. From what Will could tell, he was speaking the truth.

Lecter's face betrayed nothing, but Will could sense a tremor in him that edged invisibly over his features, betraying surprise at Will's question. It passed instantly. "Are you treating any of the young people in question now? Graduates from the high school class of 1988?"

"Currently?" Dr. Glass hesitated, shoving his hands in his trouser pockets. "Yes. I've been treating Billy Miles and Peggy O'Dell. Both long-term live-in patients."

"They're here?" Will couldn't suppress the incredulity in his voice. "In this hospital?"

"Yes. Going on four years."

“Would it be possible to talk to them?” Lecter asked as they at last reached the front entrance to the facility.

Dr. Glass opened the door and waved them through. “You might find it difficult. Certainly, in Billy Miles’ case.”

Dr. Glass checked them in with reception and led them back through the secure entrance toward a hall labeled EAST WARD. They came to a room that smelled like piss with a thin layer of disinfectant. Will shifted subtly so he could get a lungful of Lecter’s cologne instead.

A young man in a maroon pajama set reclined on the bed, which was slightly angled upward to accommodate the feeding tube in his nose. At his side was a willowy young woman with tangled, dirty blonde hair in a soft blue tunic. She sat in a wheelchair, her feet on the metal rests, clad in slippers. She was reading to him. For a moment, Will thought the young man was merely listening, absorbing the words in a kind of literary trance. But the longer he looked, the more the kid looked like a sleepwalker without the walking part.

“‘My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still, my father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will, the ship is anchor’d safe and sound, its voyage closed and done, from fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won…’” The young woman kept her spot on the page with her finger, glancing up owlishly at their approach. An orderly appeared as well, coming in to check the boy’s tube and fluffing up his pillow to increase gravity’s assistance.

“Billy here is experiencing what we call a waking coma. Functionally, his brain waves are flat, and he is in a persistent vegetative state,” Dr. Glass said without offering any explanation or introductions, as if his patients were zoo animals and he was giving a tour.

“Good afternoon,” Lecter said to the young woman in the wheelchair, offering courtesy where none was before.

“Hello,” she said quietly, glancing at each of them furtively.

Will nodded, avoiding eye contact. “S-sorry to interrupt.”

“Oh, it’s all right.”

Lecter asked Glass, “If I may, how did Mr. Miles come to be in this state?”

“Billy and Peggy here were in an automobile accident out on State Road.” At last, Glass acknowledged the girl, though it was with a paternal, condescending tone. “Peggy, we have some visitors. Would you like to talk to them for a moment?”

“Billy wants me to read now,” Peggy said, her mouth giving a nervous twitch.

“... ‘from fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won, exult O shores, and ring O bells! But I with mournful tread, walk the deck my Captain lies, fallen cold and dead’,” Will recited, kneeling in front of the girl, trying to get on her level. “Whitman’s one of my favorites, too. Does, ah, does Billy like you to read to him?”

“Yes. Billy needs me close,” Peggy nodded.

“Sure he does,” Will soothed, taking a page out of Lecter’s book with his tone, his empathy pulse telling him just how to play it. “What are you going to read to him next? Maybe, uhm, “I Hear America Singing’?”

She nodded with a ghostly smile, flipping through the book.

Will stood and looked at Lecter, who had his eyes fixed on Billy Miles. The young man was moving. His eyes and face twitched, and his throat jumped in a peristaltic tremor. Lecter waved the orderly aside and checked the feeding tube, stepping on the pedal to lift the patient’s torso further.

Will stepped back and spoke quietly to Dr. Glass. “Is it possible for Dr. Lecter to give Peggy a-a cursory medical exam?”

Peggy’s head shot up, her body wracked with tremors, her face going from pale to livid, stained with agitation. She snapped the book closed and threw it. It bounced harmlessly off the end of Billy’s hospital bed. “NO!” she shrieked.

“Whoa, whoa, now, it’s okay, honey–” the orderly tried, flying to her side. She pushed him away and gripped the edge of a nearby tray, clattering instruments and tubing to the floor, flailing for a moment before gripping the wheels of her chair and trying to get out the door, still shrieking. The orderly was joined by a nurse, alerted by the noise, and they struggled with the girl who now bit and scratched and snarled like a feral creature. Will stepped in to help, just in time to see blood erupt from Peggy’s nose in a crimson gush. She pitched out of her wheelchair onto the floor, scrabbling across the linoleum, still trying to escape as if she were moments away from being sent to a firing squad.

Her paralyzed legs added dead weight, and her flailing made trying to get her back in the chair like shoving a fighting cat in a travel crate. Will grabbed the back of her pajama top. Dragging it up, he exposed her lower back.

Two dime-sized marks, puckered at the edges. Just like on Karen Swenson. “Lecter, you seeing this?” Will called over his shoulder, where Lecter stood at Billy’s bedside, the picture of poise, not even tempted to lend a hand.

“Yes, I see it,” he confirmed. And then, he broke. There was that twitch again, accompanied by the tiniest snarl of lip.

Lecter was rattled.

Will turned his attention back to the struggling girl and helped the orderlies hold her down while she was given an injection. “It’d help if you were gone,” one of them snapped as the girl continued to thrash.

Will disengaged and got up, adjusting his rumpled clothes. Dr. Lecter was nowhere in sight, so Will hurried back down past reception and out of the hospital.

Outside, Will hurried to catch up with him as he strode down the path to the parking lot. "Billy Miles, ah… says goodbye and thanks for visiting," he said, searching the aristocratic face for further chips in the mask.

"How did you know?"

"What?" Will had to hustle to keep up with Lecter's long, purposeful strides.

"You asked Dr. Glass if it would be possible to give the girl a physical examination. You wouldn't have asked unless you knew it would reveal the markings."

"Lucky guess," Will deflected with a shrug.

Lecter stopped short and turned to Will. His pupils were pinpricks in the sunlight and his eyes gave a rich, bloody maroon under-color. Will's shoulders quivered involuntarily. "Tell me," he commanded, an edge to his voice slicing away pieces of decorum. "Tell me what they are, Will." When Will didn't answer right away, Lecter edged closer, bringing a gentle waft of cologne and danger. "What are they?"

"Why, so you can write it in your report?" Will said, anger unfurling in his gut. He deployed eye contact now, taking off his glasses and gathering them in his clammy hand, closing the space between them even further. "I don't think you're ready for what I think."

"I want the truth." Lecter didn't back down and seemed to loom larger and taller than his physical dimensions.

"The truth?" Will scoffed. "I think, ah… I think these kids were *abducted*."

"By whom?'

"By what," Will corrected.

Lecter studied him for what felt like an endless, razor-wire moment. Will eventually looked away and took a half step back, wiping his glasses on his shirt and putting them back on. "You truly believe they were abducted by extraterrestrials." It took Will a second to realize what the final word of his sentence was – marred by his accent, which seemed to have become thicker in his agitation, besides being a hard word to pronounce.

"You got a better explanation?"

They were walking toward the car now, the awful tension easing with each step. "The girl could be suffering from some form of pronounced psychosis, whether it's organic or the result of those marks. She could have sustained a traumatic brain injury in the accident that paralyzed her. The markings could have been left after a surgery to gauge the damage to her spine."

"But that doesn't explain why those same marks were on Karen," Will said gently as he unlocked the rental car and they got in.

"There is no evidence to support your theory."

“Nothing scientific,” Will agreed, buckling his seatbelt.

“While William of Occam did not originate the phrase 'entities are not to be multiplied without necessity’ he certainly popularized it,” Lecter said.

“Made it a razor,” Will agreed. “And let me guess. You’re gonna tell me that the simplest explanation is what we should be looking for.”

“Riding around in flying saucers does not seem likely, no.” Lecter set his briefcase between his feet as Will started the car.

“Seems like the simplest explanation to William of Lafayette Parish,” Will said with a wry half-smile. It made him feel good, he realized, when it was returned, though in Lecter’s mild, polite way, the curve understated but genuine.

“Four victims. All of them died in or near the woods. Karen Swenson was in her nightgown ten miles from home, no shoes. How did she get there? Our next line of inquiry should attempt to answer that question.”

“And the question of what the hell all those kids were doing out in the woods,” Will added.

“It seems we have a course of action. Shall we go while we have the light?”

Will shook his head. “We need to be there around the same time of night they were.” He eyed Lecter’s suit, and then the way his hand, textured with strength, rested on his thigh. “You, ah… bring any hiking boots?”

“I’ll acquire some. We passed an outfitter on main street.”

Chapter 7

Will was not prepared for Hannibal Lecter in forest adventuring clothes.

He'd purchased top-of-the-line lightweight waterproof pants in chestnut brown, two-hundred-dollar hiking boots, a gray denim collared shirt, and an olive-green vest with a few extra pockets that hugged his body in a way that was more distracting than outdoorsy.

Will felt sweat prickle his brow as he handed Lecter a flashlight. "Jesus, we're, ah, not climbing Mt. Everest."

"I had a very convincing salesman," was the reply.

They drove out to the section of woods where Karen Swenson's body had been found, headlights cutting through the cloudy, moonless night. Will could feel a kind of charge in the air; whether that was from something otherworldly or a gathering electrical storm, he wasn't sure. He guided the car slowly down the rough, rutted road until the yellow crime scene tape came into view, fluttering wildly in the sudden gusts of wind that snaked through the old-growth trees.

They searched the scene again, finding nothing by flashlight. Will shrugged and held the tape up so Lecter could slide under. "She came from this direction, I think," Will said, calling out to be heard over the wind sawing through the trees. They crossed the clearing and entered the woods, flashlights on the ground to keep their footing, pausing occasionally to reconnoiter.

Will fished around in his jacket pocket for his compass, flipping it open. He illuminated it with his flashlight, and a surge of excited anxiety barbed its way through his body. The needle was spinning haphazardly. "That's what I thought," he murmured through a half-cracked grin.

"There's a faint trail here," Lecter said from up ahead, pointing his flashlight to a series of marks on a stretch of moss where it'd been ripped up, probably by someone running. They followed it to another clearing. Will kept his flashlight on the ground, looking for any more tracks as Lecter moved to the edge of the forest, lighting up the trees. "There are burn marks on some of these leaves and branches," he reported.

Will spotted a bare patch in the center of the clearing, where the grass seemed to have been burned away. He knelt and reached out a hand to touch it. It was cold now, of course, but there was a layer of gray ash on the bare earth, with scorched and withered grass surrounding it. The earth itself seemed to have been heated; it reminded Will of digging out a fire pit, but aside from a few leaves and bits of grass, there was no sign of any type of fuel, wood especially. He dug his fingers deeper into the ashes, scooping up a handful and sifting it through his fingers, looking for… he didn't know what.

"Lecter, look at this," he called, grabbing another handful and lifting his head and light to where Dr. Lecter had just been.

He was gone.

"Lecter?" Will called, wincing at how wavery his voice sounded, barely audible over the wind stirring the trees. He cleared his throat and tried again, getting to his feet. "Lecter!"

The wind was really picking up now. The storm was coming, and rain would certainly wash away the fine layer of ash that blanketed the clearing.

But maybe that wasn't the wind. Or thunder.

Will could only describe it as an un-sound. A metallic, percussive booming, hollow, like a storm far out at sea.

"Lecter!" he shouted.

No answer. The sound became louder and clearer, hurting Will's ears and driving his heart into a frenzy. Was this it? Was it… them? Was this the answer to everything?

Or was this what killed those kids?

Maybe they were one in the same.

Mortal fear won over investigative determination. Will turned and jogged back across the clearing, climbing a small rise toward where they'd left the car.

Without warning, the woods exploded into a bright white light. Will squinted, instinctively holding up a hand to shield his eyes, heart launching up into his throat. The un-sound swelled around him; he could feel it in his chest, vibrating his bones.

Someone was standing at the top of the rise, silhouetted by the violent light. Will tried to discern features, but his eyes wouldn't cooperate. "Lecter? Is that you?" he shouted, voice molded in desperation.

The figure was a ghost made of shadow, casting ribbons of light and dark. It walked toward him with eerie slowness. The percussions of atmosphere boomed louder, aching in his ears.

Will raised his flashlight instinctively, his body thinking of it as a weapon.

His torch battled the light, and suddenly it was gone, all of it. He was staring into the illumination thrown by a truck with a high-powered light bar attached. And the figure walking toward him was a man with close-cropped gray hair wearing a dark windbreaker and khakis. He was holding a shotgun, his face stony.

It'd been a long, long time since Will had had a full-on *vision*. But was he seeing something that had happened, would happen, or was it a hallucination conjured from his own fears?

Will instinctively kept the flashlight on his face, a throwback to his stint in NOPD. "FBI," he said, the light shaking, sweat pouring down from his forehead. "D-drop your

weapon."

The man spoke, further bringing Will back to reality. "I'm with the County Sheriff's department. You're trespassing on private property here."

Will dipped the flashlight down to catch the man's badge that hung around his neck. "We're, ah, we're conducting a-an investigation," he said, using his free hand to wipe sweat from his forehead. It was still balled into a fist – the ashes! He kept it that way.

"Good evening."

Will's light and the stranger's gun barrel swung to the left where Dr. Lecter stepped out of the underbrush and into the clearing. Lecter held his hands out as he walked, palms turned toward the lawman to show he was unarmed. "Agent Hannibal Lecter, and this is my partner, Agent Graham. We're with the FBI, as my colleague mentioned–"

The man with the shotgun cut him off. "Get in your car and leave now, or I'll have to arrest you. Both of you. I don't care who you are."

Will watched Lecter's pale brows lift, a minute shift. "May I ask for your name and business card?" he requested with dangerous politeness. "We may wish to follow up with your superior officer."

"I said, get in the fucking car and go, or I'm hauling you in," the man growled through gritted teeth.

"Whoa, hold on," Will protested as Lecter moved closer, getting between Will and the man's weapon. While the doctor's face seemed smoothly benign, Will sensed a coiled tension that could turn on a dime. "This is a crime scene." He gestured to the clearing behind them.

"Did you hear what I said? You're on private property without legal permission!" Okay, Will thought. He's got a point. They hadn't exactly gone through proper channels. "I'm only gonna ask you once more – get in your car and leave!"

"Of course. Please forgive our breach in protocol." Lecter waited until the lawman lowered the shotgun before reaching back and guiding Will along with him, a firm hand on his shoulder. Will noted the man's truck, the light bar across the top, and the clackety sound of its diesel engine in rough idle.

"Hey, just a heads up," Will called back, his voice curling nastily. "You got a fuel injector that's about to give up the ghost."

The man didn't respond, but when Will glanced at Lecter, he was smiling.

Thunder rumbled overhead as the wind picked up again. Lightning flashed across the horizon as they reached the car. Lecter stood at the driver's side, holding out his hand. Will fished out the key and gave it to him without protest. He was trembling and slicked with sweat, a headache drumming behind his eyes. Will got in the passenger side and Dr. Lecter

backed the car down the lane to the main road, the lawman and his truck receding into the night.

"Are you all right?"

Will dragged his sleeve over his forehead again, taking a shaky breath. "Yeah, yeah," he said as nonchalantly as he could. "Just, ah… he surprised me. Never really get used to it, having a gun drawn on you."

"You didn't draw in return."

"Neither did you."

Lecter pulled carefully out onto the darkened country highway as the first few drops of rain splattered the windshield. "That's why you left the homicide department in New Orleans, or so I've heard."

Will sighed, collapsing back onto the seat, and running a hand through his damp curls. "Yeah. Had a murder suspect pull a knife on me and…" he sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I couldn't." He battled the images as they surfaced like bloated bodies in the current of his mind – the man's crazed eyes, the flash of the knife, the way the blade felt carving along his scapula. "When I worked for the BSU, I was only designated as a Special Agent. Took me awhile to, ah… pass the psych eval. But you know all that, don't you?"

Lecter nodded patiently.

Will sighed raggedly, leaning his elbow against the windowsill as the rain began in earnest, the lightning creating jagged silhouettes as it backlit the forest.

"What was our friend from the Sheriff's Department doing out in those woods by himself at night, I wonder," Lecter mused.

"Maybe it has something to do with this." Will finally opened his fist, the aching tendons responding slowly. Lecter flipped on the dome light as he drove, glancing over at the fistful of ashes and earth. "Any idea what it is? I found it in the second clearing."

"The one with the singed leaves and twigs on the trees," Lecter said, and Will's brows shot up. "Could it have been a campfire?"

"It was all over the ground."

"Could the victims have been members of a religious cult? Meeting in the woods for their ritual practice?"

Will scoffed. "That's a little Satanic Panic of you there, Doctor." Will pulled out his compass and set it on the dashboard, flipping it open. Its hand rocked strangely west, then east. Lecter reached into one of the pockets of his vest and withdrew an evidence baggie, handing it to him. Will dumped the remainder of the ashy earth into it and sealed it, then brushed his hand over himself. He was smudged with it all over, especially on the knees of his pants and at the ankle hem.

He glanced back at the compass and saw it dip wildly again. “Pull over,” he ordered. “I need to drive.”

“Why?”

“Just do it,” Will insisted.

Lecter eased onto the shoulder, and they switched places quickly, returning to the interior of the car splattered with raindrops. Will put the car into gear and roared back onto the highway before Lecter even had a chance to buckle his seatbelt. He glanced at the compass again, then at his watch. Lecter watched him closely with his canny eyes. “Will. Are you all right?” he repeated the question.

“Huh?” Will muttered, glancing at his watch again, then back at the compass. If this road didn’t curve… “Yeah, I’m just…”

“You’re driving at a speed that one might consider reckless.” Then, “What are you looking for?”

Just as the words left his mouth, a bright flash of lightning sliced the sky, driving away the darkness. The strike was close, filling the car with its brilliance, a blinding flash that consumed everything in its intensity. Will pressed the brake and pumped it on the wet road, his eyes useless.

And then it was dark again.

Everything. No lightning, no moon. No dome lights or headlights or instrument panel. The car coasted to the shoulder under Will’s direction, the engine dead, the only sound his ragged breathing and the drum of the rain on the roof. They rolled to a stop.

Will turned the key back to the off position, then tried to start the car. Nothing, as if the battery was dead.

“Will.”

He turned to Lecter, finding his face pale and his dark eyes fever-bright.

“We lost power,” Will said, trying the engine again for emphasis before turning it back to the off position again. “Brakes, uh, steering… everything. L-like on the plane.” He glanced at his watch again and felt a grin spread across his face even as his nerves sang with tension. “We… we lost nine minutes.” He looked up at Lecter again, his grin spreading wider. “Nine minutes!”

Will shot out of the car into the driving rain, hurrying down the highway. He didn’t stop to zip up his jacket and was soaked instantly, except his feet, which were protected by his worn but reliable boots.

A few moments later, Lecter was at his side, equally soaked, though the moisture beaded up on his weatherproof hiking gear. “What did you say?” he called over the rain, reaching out to grasp Will’s shoulder.

“Nine minutes!” Will broke away and hustled along the rain-slicked asphalt until he found what he was looking for. “X marks the spot!”

Lecter caught up to him again. Will showed him his watch. “I looked at my watch just before the flash. T-the light, right, you saw it? A-and, now it’s just – it’s 9:13! And look!” He beamed his torch down on the road, revealing the spray-painted X he’d left behind.

Lecter looked at him, blank-faced.

“Abductees, Lecter! People who have made UFO sightings – they’ve reported unexplained time loss!” Will snapped his wet fingers. “Gone, just like that.” He paused to breathe and sucked in a lungful of rain-soaked air. There was another scent, however, emanating from… somewhere. Rancid, eggy. “Smell that? Smell the air, Lecter, it smells like…”

“Sulphur,” Lecter said, his nostrils flaring. “Will. Time cannot disappear. It is a universal variant.”

Will studied him for a moment, the empathy pulse rustling in the back of his mind. Lecter was trying to convince himself of that fact more than Will.

Suddenly, their rental car’s high beams blasted on, the sedan a lighthouse guiding them to safety from the storm.

“Not in this zip code,” Will said through a triumphant smile, and headed back to the car.

Chapter 8

Agent Graham's insistence of time loss, due to "unknown forces", cannot be validated or substantiated by this witness.

I pause, pen in hand, re-reading the draft of my report I'll have typed and sent to Chief Blevins. Again, I wish I had looked at my own watch before the flash of light. Closing my eyes, I wander the halls of the memory palace, looking for the right door.

There it is. A small swinging door that might lead to a back kitchen. I open it and see the interior of the rental car. The clock on the dashboard reads 9:03.

We lost time.

When Mischa and I were taken, I returned after three days, 72 hours down to the very minute. And yet, in my perception, weeks had passed, perhaps months, a torturous stretch of unspeakable suffering.

The storm pelts the motel room windows with rain. It should be soothing, but the sound crawls in my ears, insectile and droning. I pour myself a glass of wine and return to the warped table, taking a moment to roll up the sleeves of my silk pajama shirt.

The power flickers for a moment, and then the room is plunged into darkness. I hear Will curse through the wall that separates our rooms.

I continue to write by flashlight until there is a knock at my door. It's the hotel manager, bringing me a few candles in pint-sized mason jars. "If you like the smell, my sister makes these and sells 'em," she's eager to tell me.

I thank her and light one, leaving it on the counter near the sink in the cramped toilet. Lighting another for the table, I put my flashlight away. The sickly-sweet scent is unfortunate, but I do prefer candlelight to all other forms of illumination.

Water running next door. Will must be having a shower.

Best not to think about that. I sip my wine and return to my report. *We were warned off the property by a man claiming to work for the local sheriff, though he declined to reveal his name or any credentials beyond a badge.*

I am writing the word *ash* when there is a rapid knock at my door, different than the polite taps of the hotel manager. A peek through the peephole reveals Will Graham. Shirtless. A scanty motel towel around his waist.

I open the door. How could I not? When I kill, my heartbeat does not change. Right now, the muscles expand and contact wildly, driving a rushing current in my ears. It only increases when he darts past me, so close I can feel the warmth of his body heat and smell the woods on him, the rain.

I close the door and he turns to me, pale and wild-eyed, uplit gothically from the candle on the table. “I want you to look at something,” he says, flat and frightened.

Well. That’s one way to begin a seduction.

He turns and removes the towel. He’s wearing a set of pale blue cotton boxers beneath, and he points to the external oblique on his left side.

I take the candle and kneel behind him; my free hand thinks itself entirely free, and skims down the soft skin along his spine as I do. I raise the candle, the light flickering gold, making him a being of gilded shadow.

He is trembling. I feel my cock twitch.

“What are they?” Will’s voice is firmer now, more resolute. “It’s them, isn’t it? The marks…?”

I set the candle down and stand once more to retrieve my flashlight. Within seconds I see the red welts for what they are, but I let myself linger here, kneeling behind him, worshipful supplicant, let my hand curve around his hip and leaning forward with the light, graze my fingers along the top of his pelvic bone.

“Lecter–!”

I stand and he turns to me, gaunt, the lower lip of his mouth a petal shaking in a rough spring wind, kissed by Zephyrus.

“Mosquito bites,” I assure him.

“You’re sure?” he presses, taking what seems to be an instinctive half-step towards me. I can smell mint toothpaste on his breath and the tang of fear-sweat, sharp and vital, cutting through the cloying vanilla of the candles.

“I suffered a few myself, despite insect repellant.” I lift my foot to the chair and show him my ankle, where I have three raised welts just above where the edge of my new boots protected me.

I straighten, watching him turn away from me again, rubbing his face and hair so that it stands up even more wildly. “Fuck,” he whispers, and I can’t tell if he’s cursing because they are insect bites and not the marks we’ve been investigating, or because he’s scolding himself for overreacting.

It takes a significant amount of self-control not to ease up behind him, touch him again. “Wine?” I offer instead.

“You’re drinking wine?” There it is, his typical, playfully wry tone. “Little elegant for a place like this.”

“They sold it at the outfitters. Apparently, it’s considered a staple for local hikers.”

He smiles, just for a moment, a respite from the grim tension coiled around him like a parasitic vine. I watch him run his hand up his arm to grip his shoulder for a moment; it is benign, but my brain interprets the gesture as erotic. It takes another dose of potent self-control, but I retrieve my black robe with the white piping from the hanger in the crevice that serves as a closet, and offer it to him. I do indulge myself by holding it up for him to slip on, sliding it onto his shoulders myself. He ties it hurriedly, and I can see his hands are still shaking.

I pour my remaining wine in one of the motel's atrocious plastic cups, then rinse my glass. He isn't looking at me; his eyes are clouded, distant, arms hugging himself. My robe is just a little too big, and the sleeves come halfway down his hands. His posture makes him look smaller than he is, which is only two or three inches shorter than me.

I dry the glass and set it on the table, filling it with pinot noir. "Last year was the hottest in Oregon's viticultural history. Grapes were harvested in early to mid-September, though the heat did relent towards the end of the growing season, allowing for a pleasant vintage. Fruit forward. I don't think it will age well." The wine whispers into the glass. Backlit by the candle on the table, it looks like a liquid gem.

He revives, and takes the offered glass, looking down at the ruby pour. "Better drink it now, I guess."

I raise my plastic cup and he taps the glass against it with a self-deprecating smile. I watch him bring it to his lips and drink. "It's good," he says, though I can sense the uncertainty.

"The first step in the development of taste is to be willing to credit your own opinion."

"I mean it – i-it is good," Will says. "Fruity, like you said. Also, it's alcoholic, which, ah… well." He takes another, larger mouthful.

"Why don't you sit for a minute?" I keep my voice warm but gently clinical. Doctor's orders.

He sinks down onto the edge of the bed. My heart is a bird beating against window glass. "I shouldn't have bothered you." His way of apology. "I've been bitten by every damn insect in this hemisphere; I should have known…"

"Your reaction is understandable given the nature of our investigation."

"Good old *culex pipiens*," Will says, raising his glass in an ironic toast that I do not return, choosing instead to sit opposite him in the chair. Ignoring every instinct to sit next to him instead. "Now all I gotta worry about is, ah… West Nile virus."

"Symptoms can be unpleasant. Everything from fever and vomiting to encephalitis."

"Yeah, that's the last thing I need. Though then I'd have something to blame it on," he mutters.

"Blame what on?"

He shakes his head, taking another drink. “Nothing. M-my behavior. ‘Spooky Graham wasn’t spooky; his brain was just on fire’.”

“A medical explanation for your reputation.” I refill his glass, then resume my seat. “Does your reputation concern you?”

“No.”

“Your previous comment would suggest otherwise.”

He drinks again, then fingers the stem of the glass. “It’s a hindrance sometimes. When I need to be taken seriously. But it, ah… also allows for some latitude. At least, it did, until you showed up.” He glances at me, eyes glimmering in the undulating candlelight, reflecting twin flames. “Now I have to divide my attention.”

The thought of him paying any sort of attention to me is like food before a starving man; I devour it and lick the crumbs. “Between your investigative quest and mitigating me.” Pause. “You want to believe. The poster in your office is your mantra. Do you want me to believe as well? In whatever mission to which you’ve dedicated yourself?”

“I don’t need you to believe me,” he says sourly, setting his half-finished glass on the bedside table. “I just need Blevins off my back.”

“What is it that you want to believe, Will? That the universe is not a black expanse of stars and silence? That we share our suffering under a capricious God with beings on another planet?”

“I don’t believe in God,” he says. I sense it is a reflexive response.

“It would be a relief to share the burden of his wanton cruelty and matchless irony,” I muse, making a face as the plastic cup touches my lips. It does nothing for the wine.

“You’re religious?” He furrows his brow.

“God’s terrific. He dropped a church roof on thirty-four of his worshippers last Wednesday night in Texas while they sang a hymn.”

“Did God feel good about that?” Will asks, shifting back to sit with his back against the headboard. He crosses his legs at the ankle, and I am surer than ever that God does exist, that he enjoys oscillating between blessings and curses, starting endless bloody wars and, in the same breath, creating those beautiful feet and shapely ankles. I want to kiss the ball of his bone beneath the tender layer of skin and shove my tongue between his toes.

“He felt powerful,” I say, voice and face betraying nothing of my fantasy. The candlelight is no help.

He drains the glass again and looks at his hands, worries them over the robe tie as I empty the bottle into our respective vessels. I can’t tell if he’s flushed or it’s merely the lighting. “You want to know what I do what I do.” Not a question. “Why I, ah… left the BSU and a

perfectly good career as a criminal profiler and went after the H-files." Pause. "You know why they call them that? H-files?"

"Filed under H for Hopeless," I say softly.

Will nods, then smiles thinly, pointing a finger at himself.

"Dostoyevsky says that to live without hope is to cease to live."

"Yeah, and Nietzsche says it prolongs the suffering of man. Worst of, ah, all evils." Will runs his thumb along his bottom lip.

A weighty pause. I shift, crossing my legs. "You were saying?"

Will shakes his head, swirling the wine in the glass, creating a tiny whirlpool draining down, not to examine the viscosity. "You'll run right to Blevins."

I tilt my head a few degrees to the right, accompanied by a miniscule shrug. "Tonight, you came to me for medical attention. I gave you an exam. Our appointment has yet to conclude. What you tell me now is protected by doctor-patient confidentiality."

He eyes me warily, wearily. "Are you serious?"

"I take HIPAA very seriously, yes."

Will sighs, looking at the dingy ceiling for a moment before draining his wine glass. "Fuck it," he mutters, the curse nearly drowned out by a crash of nearby thunder. "Bring the light over." He swings his legs over the side of the mattress and beckons me closer. My heart vaults upon a lance of that gesture. I pick up my flashlight and approach.

Will stretches his arm around his head and lifts his hair away from behind his left ear, using the other to comb back other curls, his fingertips seeking something out on his scalp. "You see it?"

I shine the light where his fingertips indicate. There is a small scar there, an inch or just shy of. It is perfectly straight and surgically precise. The hairs that grow at its perimeter, I can see now, are dyed the same color as the rest of his hair. The roots reveal the natural hue to be a brilliant white.

"You had a brain surgery," I say turning off the flashlight.

He lets his curls fall. "No," Will insists. "I didn't. I have all my medical records. My dad says I never did. I've tracked down every school I ever attended – and lemme tell you, there were a hell of a lot of them – and no one there remembers a boy my age missing for surgery. The hospitals in those towns have no record of me. All my dad will say is that one morning in Grand Haven, Michigan, I woke up with a white streak in my hair. I was eight."

I sink down next to him on the mattress, my confusion assisting my rash decision. "May I see it again?"

He obliges me. I touch the scar and find nothing abnormal, aside from the lack of pigmentation in the surrounding hairs.

“My granny, when she was alive, she, ah, she practiced folk magic, so my dad grew up with a lot of superstitions. He cut the streak off and told me not to talk about it. When I was older, I figured it was poliosis, but then I, ah… shaved it all for my police academy training and I found… it. The scar.” He’s trembling again. Leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, he rubs his face and slowly rights himself, not looking at me. “And I started… having dreams. But I don’t think they were dreams.” He looks me in the eye now. “Hannibal.” Oh, my name is luscious in his mouth when he’s vulnerable like this. “I think they were memories.”

“Memories of?” I let the question hang.

As he speaks, the tumblers of his lock fall into place one at a time. “When I was a beat cop in New Orleans, I… solved a murder pretty much on my own. That was the first time I realized what I could do. See, ever since that day I woke up with the streak, I could… assume anyone’s point of view. To the point of distraction, until I learned to control it. A-a kid would get hurt on the playground and I’d start crying. My dad would come home pissed from work and we’d just start screaming at each other, even though I’d been fine all day until he walked through the door.”

“An empathy disorder,” I say, keeping my bedside manner.

“Lemme guess – you’re about to say something about mirror neurons,” Will says. “I’m telling you, before that morning in Michigan, I was a normal kid.” He looks at me, and I can’t help but believe him, with his eyes like that, shining with unshed tears. “And after that, it was just… chaos. Eventually I learned… ways to mitigate it, and then, ah… control it, as best I could. Then how to use it. I made detective, got recruited to the Bureau. I found I had a natural aptitude for applying behavior models to criminal cases and profiling killers. I caught Monte Propps, and became the FBI’s, ah… fair haired *boy*.”

“Just here,” I say gently, lifting my hand to touch the scar again. He hums, grateful, it seems, for the ease in tension, the shadow of a smile flickering across his mouth in sync with the candlelight. “On the fast track. I suppose your success gave you the freedom to pursue your own interests. And you wanted to investigate the H-files.”

“At first, it looked like… like a-a garbage dump for UFO reports, alien abduction cases, the stuff everybody laughs off as ridiculous. But I was fascinated. I read every case. Hundreds of them. I learned… everything I could about the occult, about paranormal phenomena…” He looks me in the eye now, ready, I sense, to be even more vulnerable. Instinctively, I reach out and settle a hand on his shoulder. The flesh and muscle beneath the cool silk are feverishly warm. “There is classified government information I’ve been trying to access trying to figure out what happened to me all those years ago. But someone… is blocking my attempts to get at it.”

“Who?” I ask, as if I don’t already know. I’m aware of the gatekeepers.

“Someone at a higher level of power.” He shifts closer again. “The only reason I’ve been allowed to continue with my work is because my cousin Freddie has dirt on half of Congress.”

“Are they afraid that you’ll leak sensitive information?”

“You tell me.” Will shifts away, and I let my hand fall. “You’re part of this agenda. You know that.”

“I’m not part of any agenda, Will, you can trust me–”

He cuts me off. “You are… a cat.”

Pause. “A cat,” I repeat.

“Yeah. Nobody’s gonna force you to go where you don’t wanna go or do what you don’t wanna do. You must have gotten this assignment on purpose. I’m still trying to figure out why.”

Clever boy.

“My presence here is not an accident.” Why am I telling the truth? “I arranged for this assignment through back channels.”

Will nods, face drawn, owlish. A stray curl falls forward over his forehead. “Thought so. Though I can’t understand why.”

“When I was eleven, my sister, Mischa – nine at the time – disappeared from her bed one night. My mother was found dead in the kitchen of what appeared to be a brain aneurysm. But of Mischa, there was no sign. Just gone. Vanished. No phone calls, ransom demands. No evidence. My father was away on business, but I was home that night. I went to sleep as normal. I woke up in the woods three days later to find Mischa gone. That they’d found my mother dead on the kitchen floor next to a broken teacup.”

He turns to face me directly, drawing up and bending his leg on the mattress, hand resting on his foot and thigh, tongue touching his lower lip as he no doubt deploys his strange power to ensure I’m telling the truth. I feel suddenly exposed, naked, armorless. “Abducted,” he says, just above a whisper, touching his scar.

“I’ve been working closely with Dr. Bedelia du Maurier. She’s taken me through deep regression hypnosis. I’ve been able to go deep into my own repressed memories of the night my sister disappeared. I can recall a bright light outside and a presence in the room. I’m paralyzed – unable to respond to my sister’s calls for help.”

Will takes me by the wrists in a swift move. Unexpected. Seems I can never entirely predict him. “Listen to me, Lecter. This *thing* exists. Y-you know it, a-and I know it. The government knows about it. I have to know what they’re protecting. Nothing else matters to me. This is as close as I’ve ever gotten to it.”

“As close as *we’ve* ever gotten to it,” I correct him, my voice laden with a kind of undertow I feel myself being sucked into. Will’s passion and honesty burn in his penetrating stare, willing and able to look me in the eye now.

He is a true believer. And so am I.

“*I – believe – you*,” I say softly, slowly enunciating each syllable.

His hands grip me with a newfound strength and surety. Can he feel my pulse thundering through my veins where he is, at last, touching me, skin to skin? This feels like swearing on a sacred text, like a vow. Tears well up in his eyes as his pupils expand further, making black out of blue, the view of a spacecraft exiting the bonds of Earth.

His grip on my wrists eases as one crystalline tear falls. But I don’t pull away. I have no desire to escape him. I move my arms only to slide my hands into his, to grasp them with firm surety. They are warm and alive and beautifully capable of so much. It dawns on me, then, that if what he’s saying is true, that extraterrestrial beings gave him the power of pure empathy, they have created the only man on the planet who can see the world through my point of view. Who can understand me. Love me, even, despite what I have become.

The aliens made me a monster. They made him capable of loving one.

Did they build the pyramids, bury the heads at Easter Island, erect the circles at Stonehenge? Perhaps the spacefarers are capable of acts so boldly visible.

Or perhaps they prefer playing God on a smaller scale.

Did they make him for me? Me for him?

“The truth… is out there,” he says, voice husky and laden with sweet revelation. “I’ll help you find your sister, a-and… you can help me understand… what they did to me.”

“Will,” is all I can say, tears of my own gathering. I lift his left hand in my right, and I kiss the place on his finger where the artery runs directly to his heart. The place where, one day, I hope, my ring will rest. Through the twist of emotion on his face rises a moment of surprise that brings a darker flush to the delicate skin of his cheekbones, rising above his stubble, and down his neck and decolletage. He pulls his hands free from mine and there is a fraction of a second where I despair.

But he’s done it to embrace me, throwing his arms around my neck. I clutch him, twisting the fabric of the robe in my grip, lowering my head to his shoulder. It all breaks free now, a glacier melting, ice fracturing and sliding into the sea. I hear him murmur something comforting my overtaxed brain can’t translate. The meaning is clear enough as he strokes my hair, fingers soothing down my temple and across my back.

He comforts me so recklessly. “We’ll find her,” he promises. “We’ll find her, and we’ll make sure they… they can’t do what they did to anyone else ever again. And these men that a-are h-hiding them, hiding the truth… there will be a *reckoning*.”

At this moment, I believe him. He thinks of himself as hopeless. But he is my greatest hope now, and I welcome it as he breaks apart my armor, piece by piece, and burrows beneath my skin, seeping into my blood and riding its current into my heart.

Where it is then pumped with each beat, my vital proof of life, filling every vein and artery and capillary.

I raise my head from his shoulder and bring my hand to his cheek, brushing a tear away. If the extraterrestrials made him for me, gave him the capability to know me and see me, to accept my rare gift, I would be eternally grateful no matter what package that knowing came in. But to choose someone so beautiful – was this part of the design, his dark curls and petal lips, the spray of freckles across his nose, his slender waist, and the posterior I've been admiring since the day we met?

I feel a kind of hunger that is rooted in something primal. One branch of the tree hungers for his flesh. The other wants it for other purposes.

He leans into my touch, a starving man gravitating to sustenance.

I don't know how it happens. It isn't like me at all to not recall a detail as important as who leaned in first, who pulled the other to him, whether it was mutual and balanced, if we were drawn together at a matching velocity like a physics equation. Will is correct when he says time moves differently in this zip code. I am suddenly in his arms, and he is in mine, and our lips are working ardently against one another's, trading intrusions of tongue as the storm redoubles its efforts, pelting the motel with torrents of rain, the thunder a continuous threat. I see him in candlelight, and I see him in the aftermath of lightning, both angel and demon, my robe falling open and then to the floor as he casts it off, kissing me down onto the bed and hurrying open the silk-covered buttons of my shirt. He is both ravenous and reverent as he reveals me in increments, kissing what he finds, running his fingertips through my chest hair, pressing the warm pad of his tongue over one nipple. When he palms my cock through the silk pajamas, which I wear without an undergarment, the luxury of the material and his primal touch are perfect opposites.

He kisses me again now as he gropes me and I can feel myself dripping, the moisture soaking through the thin material. At last, I am free to help myself to handfuls of his ass, barrier of boxers notwithstanding. It feels as good as it looks. He kisses my neck, grazes it with his teeth, pauses to breathe me in, then traces his tongue up to my earlobe. I moan and tip my head back to give him better access, and he takes advantage, dipping his lips against its curves, sucking on my laryngeal prominence, tongue finding the hollow made by my clavicles. My chest heaves with desperate gasps of the storm-charged air.

"Will… you're driving me mad," I beg as he kisses my stomach above and below my navel.

"Good thing you've, ah, studied psychology, right?" he teases with that adorable half-smile that perks up one corner of his mouth.

I love him.

Mine.

I move with the Chesapeake Ripper's speed, rolling us over and trapping him beneath me, leaning down to colonize his mouth with my lips and tongue, ships from across the ocean ready to claim. Will inhales sharply, his smile widening in surprise and amorous delight, and I catch a glimpse of that sublime expression before I bury my mouth on his again.

I devour. I caress every curve of his body, tracing every inch, every contour, committing it to memory, reading him like Braille. For this, I use my hands and the rest of me, pressing into him, our shared heat a forge. What weapons will we craft? He drags his nails, blunt as they are, along my shoulder blades and down my spine, leaving stinging welts behind, a trail of burning pleasure. I bite his lower lip, sucking it into my mouth, tasting blood.

I roll my hips grinding our clothed cocks together, eliciting a velvet moan from him that rumbles from his lungs like the near-constant thunder outside, holding him by the wrists. He squirms, can't get free; he angles up and sinks his teeth into my shoulder. I growl at him, letting him go. He pushes down the waistband of his boxers and I strip them the rest of the way before yanking down the waistband of my pajama bottoms halfway down my thighs. He gathers me to him, hungry hands squeezing my buttocks, plunging with me into the dark waters of intoxication and madness.

I rut against him as he grips my ass, feeling it move under his touch. He locks his legs around mine and grips my back, using his other hand to hold us together. I thrust myself against him through his fist, delighting in the way he can't seem to look away from our connection, slick with precum and sweat. Heat and friction overtake us, and Will quivers, the flush of his face and neck deepening. I wrestle my orgasm like Jacob's angel, holding on until I feel him come undone. And then I release, spurting through his hand and up his chest, drops catching in the fine hairs around his nipples, glistening on his sternum, a constellation of desire.

The storm is passing.

He is beneath me, clinging to me. I ease down on my side and he slings a leg over me, holding me so tightly it is as if he hopes we'll meld together, grafted to one another, a tree bearing strange fruit.

I kiss him, his forehead and mouth, his hair, and I tell him he is beautiful. Watch his eyes droop. Hold him until he sleeps.

I sleep.

No dreams.

The phone rings. Once. Twice. I shift just enough to pick up the receiver. Will sleeps on, face buried in my chest and shoulder, curls wild.

"Hello?"

"Peggy O' Dell is dead," comes a woman's voice over the line, crackling with a tenuous connection.

"May I ask who is calling, please?"

“Peggy’s dead,” the voice insists. “An accident, out on State Road. She’s dead!” A terminal click as the line goes dead.

“Hello?”

Will sleeps on as I replace the receiver. I allow myself five more minutes to hold him like this, stroke his hair, enjoy the curve of his back and backside in the dying candlelight. Then I kiss him awake.

“Huhm…?” he smiles groggily up at me. He is so beautiful at this moment the sight of him wraps me around his finger for the rest of my life.

“We’ve had a phone call.”

“When?”

“Just now. You slept through it. I must have tired you.”

He scoffs gently, then kisses my shoulder. “Guess so.” Then, “Who was it?”

“A woman. She said Peggy O’Dell is dead.”

He furrows his brow, combing his fingers through my chest hair. “The girl in the wheelchair?”

“The caller reported she was in an accident out on State Road.”

“The fuck was she doing out there at this time of night?” Will groans.

I sit up, lifting him with me, stroking his cheek with a rasp of stubble. “Duty calls,” I say.

“No rest for the wicked,” he says, and kisses me, slow and sweet.

End of Part 1

(If you want more, leave a comment! I'm taking a break from this for now, but if you want the rest of the pilot or any episodes in the future, leave a comment and let me know. Power to the readers!)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!